Identity Politics and Conflict Dynamics in Taraba State: Implications for Peacebuilding and Inclusive Governance

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Abstract

Taraba State, located in northeastern Nigeria, represents a microcosm of the country's broader ethno-religious and communal diversity. With over 80 ethnic groups—including the Jukun, Tiv, Mambilla, Fulani, Kuteb, and Chamba—the state has experienced recurrent identity-based conflicts linked to land disputes, political marginalization, and religious differences. These conflicts, particularly the Tiv–Jukun clashes, farmer–herder violence, and religiously framed tensions, have resulted in loss of life, displacement, and socio-economic decline. This paper examines the factors fueling identity conflicts in Taraba State, focusing on historical grievances, elite manipulation, governance weaknesses, and competition over resources. The study adopts a desk review of relevant scholarly literature and policy reports. It proposes comprehensive strategies for conflict mitigation, including inclusive governance, local reconciliation frameworks, intergroup dialogue, and equitable resource distribution. The paper concludes that sustainable peace in Taraba State is attainable through collaborative, multi-sectoral efforts grounded in justice, accountability, and respect for cultural diversity.

Keywords: Conflict, Identity Politics, Taraba State, Inclusive Governance, Peacebuilding

Introduction

Nigeria's history of violent conflict cannot be fully understood without examining the interaction between identity and politics. Ethnic, religious, and regional identities have become deeply embedded in political competition, shaping access to power, resources, and citizenship (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). In many contexts, these identity dynamics have escalated into violent conflict, particularly in states characterized by weak institutions and contested claims to land and political authority, such as Taraba State.

Taraba State—often referred to as Nature's Gift to the Nation—is one of Nigeria's most culturally diverse regions, hosting over 80 ethnic groups, including the Jukun, Tiv, Mambilla, Fulani, Kuteb, and Chamba. While diversity has historically enabled coexistence, it has increasingly become a source of violent conflict associated with land disputes, political marginalization, and religious differences. From the Tiv–Jukun crisis in Wukari to farmer–herder clashes on the Mambilla Plateau, identity-based violence continues to challenge peacebuilding efforts in the state. These conflicts are not isolated incidents but manifestations of deeper structural problems, including identity politics, weak governance, historical marginalization, and competition over scarce resources.

The roots of identity conflict in Taraba State are embedded in its historical and structural formation. Colonial administrative practices, particularly the British system of indirect rule, institutionalized ethnic hierarchies and political exclusion that continue to shape intergroup relations. Certain groups—such as the Jukun—were granted political authority under the Wukari Traditional Council, while others, notably the Tiv, were categorized as "settlers" despite their longstanding presence in the area (Suleiman et al., 2024; Demas et al., 2025).

These colonial categorizations entrenched systems of privilege and exclusion that persisted into the post-colonial era, especially in local governance and land administration. Traditional councils and chieftaincy institutions have often been controlled by dominant ethnic groups, generating contestation from marginalized communities (Amakoromo et al., 2024). In Takum, for instance, tensions among the Kuteb, Chamba, and Jukun are closely linked to disputes over traditional stools and political appointments.

Post-independence governance has largely failed to dismantle these inherited inequalities. Instead, political elites have often reinforced identity politics by aligning with specific ethnic blocs during elections and appointments, thereby deepening divisions (Tukura et al., 2025). The indigene–settler dichotomy embedded in Nigeria's federal system further reinforces exclusion by shaping access to political office, land, education, and employment—core drivers of conflict in Taraba State (Suleiman et al., 2024).

Against this backdrop, this paper investigates the recurring nature of identity conflicts in Taraba State, focusing on historical grievances, elite manipulation, governance failures, and resource competition. The analysis draws on academic literature and policy reports to situate Taraba's conflicts within broader debates on identity politics and peacebuilding.

Conceptual Clarification

Conflict

Conflict refers to a situation in which individuals or groups pursue incompatible interests, values, or goals, resulting in tension, confrontation, or violence. While conflict is not inherently violent, weak or absent institutional mechanisms for grievance management often allow it to escalate into physical violence (Albert, 2001). In Taraba State, conflict frequently manifests as communal clashes, farmer–herder confrontations, and ethno-political struggles over land, authority, and citizenship.

Communal Conflict

Communal conflict involves violent confrontations between groups organized along ethnic, religious, or cultural lines within a shared geographical space. Such conflicts are typically rooted in land disputes, political representation, and historical grievances (Alubo, 2009). In Taraba State, communal conflicts are recurrent and cyclical, reflecting unresolved structural tensions.

Identity

Identity denotes an individual's or group's sense of belonging shaped by shared attributes such as ethnicity, religion, language, culture, and historical experience. Social identities are socially constructed and politically mobilized within specific contexts (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Fearon & Laitin, 2000). In Taraba State, ethnic and religious identities have been transformed into instruments of political inclusion and exclusion.

Identity Politics

Identity politics occurs when ethnic, religious, or communal identities become central to political competition and resource allocation, often resulting in hostility and violence. Such conflicts are driven by perceived threats to group dignity, survival, and access to power (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). In Taraba State, identity politics underpins Tiv–Jukun clashes, Mambilla–Fulani tensions, and disputes over indigene rights.

Farmer–Herder Conflict

Farmer–herder conflict refers to violent encounters between sedentary farming communities and nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists over access to land and water. Although economic in origin, these conflicts frequently acquire ethnic and religious dimensions (Homer-Dixon, 1999; Yusuf, 2025).

Indigene–Settler Dichotomy

The indigene–settler dichotomy distinguishes "original inhabitants" from later migrants and determines access to land, political office, and state resources. Institutionalized in Nigeria, this distinction remains a major driver of exclusion and conflict (Alubo, 2009).

Resource Scarcity

Resource scarcity refers to the limited availability or unequal distribution of essential natural resources such as land and water. When combined with population growth, climate change, and weak governance, scarcity intensifies competition and heightens the risk of violence (Homer-Dixon, 1999).

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored primarily in Social Identity Theory, complemented by insights from Resource Scarcity Theory and Frustration–Aggression Theory. Given the centrality of ethnicity, indigene–settler dichotomies, and identity mobilization in Taraba State, Social Identity Theory provides the most appropriate analytical lens.

Social Identity Theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), posits that individuals derive a significant part of their self-concept from group membership. In-group favoritism and out-group discrimination emerge as individuals seek to maintain positive social identities. In Taraba State, ethnic and religious identities—such as Tiv, Jukun, Fulani, Mambilla, Christian, and Muslim—have become primary axes of political competition and social exclusion.

Although critics argue that the theory underestimates material and economic factors, it remains highly relevant to this study. Conflicts in Taraba State are explicitly framed in identity terms, structured around citizenship, indigene rights, and symbolic recognition. The theory helps explain the persistence and emotional intensity of violence beyond material

causes and provides a foundation for dialogue, reconciliation, and identity transformation strategies.

Identity-Based Conflict in Taraba State

Farmer–Herder Conflict

Farmer–herder conflict represents one of the most persistent forms of identity-related violence in Taraba State. While often portrayed as a resource dispute, it is deeply intertwined with ethnic, religious, and governance factors (Demas et al., 2025; Suleiman et al., 2024). Drivers include environmental degradation, the breakdown of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, and perceived state bias in security responses.

Ethnic and Religious Dimensions

Conflicts in Taraba are frequently framed along ethnic and religious lines, particularly where Christian farming communities confront predominantly Muslim Fulani pastoralists. These divisions intensify suspicion and exacerbate violence, especially during election periods or national crises (Amakoromo et al., 2024). Key drivers include environmental degradation and climate change, the collapse of traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms, and perceived state bias or institutional failure (Yusuf, 2025; Tukura et al., 2025).

The Mambilla Plateau Conflicte Mambilla Plateau exemplifies recurrent identity conflict, with violent clashes in 2017 and 2018 resulting in deaths and displacement. These conflicts were driven by land disputes, political representation, and elite manipulation (Demas et al., 2025).

Elite Manipulation and Conflict Entrepreneurship

The influence of elites and conflict profiteers undermines genuine peace efforts by fueling suspicion, discrediting neutral mediators, and derailing community-led dialogue. Peacebuilding initiatives often collapse under elite pressure or are used as platforms for propaganda and political bargaining rather than reconciliation (Demas et al., 2025).

Political elites and conflict entrepreneurs play a critical role in sustaining identity-based violence in Taraba State. By exploiting ethnic and religious divisions for political or economic gain, these actors exacerbate tensions and undermine peacebuilding initiatives

(Amakoromo et al., 2024). During election periods, ethnic sentiments are deliberately inflamed to create "us-versus-them" narratives, which in turn shape voting patterns and deepen distrust among communities (Tukura et al., 2025). In areas such as Wukari, Takum, and Donga, local elites have been accused of supporting one ethnic faction against another in order to secure control over land, chieftaincy institutions, and political appointments (Suleiman et al., 2024.

In many cases, these entrepreneurs benefit from insecurity through extortion, land grabbing, displacement-based speculation, or control over black-market resources. For instance, in the farmer–herder conflicts on the Mambilla Plateau, there have been reports of deliberate misinformation, exaggerated casualty figures, and staged attacks aimed at triggering cycles of retaliation—tactics often linked to powerful local actors (Suleiman et al., 2024). Weak accountability mechanisms enable impunity, allowing violence to persist and peace processes to be derailed.

Implications for Peacebuilding and Inclusive Governance

The persistence of identity-based violence in Taraba State reflects weak institutions, poor service delivery, biased conflict management, and limited accountability. These governance failures erode public trust and reinforce cycles of violence. Strengthening peacebuilding requires impartial conflict resolution mechanisms, effective justice systems, inclusive political representation, revitalized traditional institutions, and coordinated engagement between government and civil society.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Identity conflicts in Taraba State are deeply rooted but not inevitable. Sustainable peace requires inclusive governance, equitable resource distribution, and active community participation. Government, civil society, and development partners must collaborate to transform diversity from a source of violence into a foundation for coexistence.

Recommendations

Inclusive Governance and Representation:

Ensure equitable representation of all ethnic and religious groups in political appointments and decision-making processes. Harmonise customary and statutory laws to clarify land ownership and grazing rights.

Youth Employment and Empowerment:

Government, civil society, and traditional institutions should collaborate to create employment opportunities and vocational training programmes to reduce youth radicalisation.

Strengthening Traditional and Local Institutions:

Build the capacity of traditional rulers, local peace committees, and interfaith councils in conflict resolution and early warning.

Inter-Communal Dialogue and Trust Building:

Promote sustained dialogue between conflicting groups, supported by NGOs, religious leaders, and government agencies. Establish community-based early warning and rapid response mechanisms to prevent escalation.

Through coordinated, justice-oriented, and inclusive approaches, Taraba State can transform its diversity into a foundation for sustainable peace and development.

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